

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

But Why Live: Words and Language

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[Jane] This is But Why: a Broadcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. For seven weeks this spring, we're bringing our podcast to the airwaves for live radio shows in collaboration with Vermont's Agency of Education to offer kids who are out of school a chance for your own call-in radio show. And if you live in Vermont and surrounding areas, you don't even need an Internet connection.

Today, we're going to talk about words and language; how new words come alive, why our languages are always changing, why most people in one country might speak a different language than people in another country. And we're going to get into why and how words have power and who determines the power that words have. If you want to add your voice to the conversation, grab your adult and give us a call. You can send an e-mail to questions@butwhykids.org. Our guest today is John McWhorter. He's a professor, that's a teacher, at Columbia University in New York. He's also written a lot of books about language and he hosts his own podcast. It's called Lexicon Valley. John has joined us before. John, what a pleasure to have you on the show again.

[John] Thank you for thinking of me.

[Jane] Well, we're excited to talk about words and language and, you know, words and language are always interesting. But a lot of adults in this country right now are thinking about the power of words, the power of language and so, I think, are kids. And so we're going to talk a lot about why words have power and how they have power. But we also have a lot of questions about where words came from, who gets to invent words, how they happen. Here's a question for you first, John, from Audrey, who's six.

[Audrey] I live in Seattle and my question is, "Why do humans talk?"

[Jane] And then Remy, who's seven, also sent us a similar question.

[Remy] I'm from London and my question is, "How does your brain form language?"

[Jane] And Mixon, who's six in Nashville, Tennessee, wants to know too how your brain knows which words to use. So could you talk a little bit about the science and biology of language?

[John] Hmm. What a fun thing to have to actually put into clear terms, into words. Well, the way that the brain handles language is roughly that if you are listening to somebody say something, you process it first, usually with the right side. And what the right side is hearing is the music of it, the tone of it, whether somebody is angry, whether somebody is happy. Then it slides the signal into the left side. And in the left side of your brain you have one part...and these are kind of parts that are like around your ears if you think about how the brain works...[00:03:09] there's one part that processes what language means, the meaning part of it, what words mean. Then there's another part of it where you figure out how you're going to move your mouth and your lungs and put the words in order and say something in response. And so, in a way, there's a meaning part

and then there is a kind of talking part. And that's how you respond to something that you've heard. So there are parts of your brain that are very good at hearing what people say and at coming up with some sort of answer to it. And in other animals, some other animals, you have those kinds of parts of the brain, but they don't do the job as well as our brains do. And so we can talk about something that happened yesterday. That's not something that any ape, that any dog, that any crow, that any parrot can do. So we do it on a really high level. But that's roughly the way it works.

[Jane] Although it is cool that when you listen to the way an animal communicates...you know, and again, this is a human interpretation of an animal communication...but you can also kind of hear the tone. You can tell, if you have a dog, when your dog is barking because it might be angry or threatened. That's a different sound than a happy bark.

[John] Exactly. Yeah. Dogs have the tone. They've got that down. But the thing is, they don't have that much more than that in terms of communicating specific things. My favorite example of this is that you can think of a dog as saying. They can understand a lot of words, but what they say over and over again is just, "hey, hey, hey, hey" if you watch a dog barking. That's from Gary Larson, the cartoonist. And that really is dead on if you watch what dogs are saying. They can understand a lot but they can't say something. It's humans who've gotten really good at saying something.

[Jane] And I love how you talk about it's not just the words that someone says, but our brains are also so able to interpret that tone because in speaking...so if you're hearing something or if you're watching the way someone's talking...that tone has so much impact on what the words are actually meaning.

[John] Definitely. We tend to forget that because, especially if we're in a society with writing, we have a way of thinking that what writing is like is what language is like when really the tone...what you intend, what you're implying that you're not saying...that's half of language. It's not just saying things like, "The pencil is on the table." If you're sitting there seeing the pencil on the table, chances are you don't need to tell somebody that. Or if you do tell them, you know, you're either two years old or you're kind of a boring person. The issue is why you would bring it up. And that's as much a part of language as the fact that the pencil is on the table.

[Jane] Yeah, or if I say, "Thanks a lot." I might be saying, "John, thank you so much." or I might be saying, "Yeah right, thanks a lot!" [sarcastically].

[John] And that's the music in it that you have to hear as a person.

[Jane] Well, here we have another question coming in. It's from Reya.

[Reya] I'm nine years old and I live in Singapore. My question is, "Who invented the alphabet?"

[Jane] So Reya told us it's going to be 1:00 in the morning as our program is going live, John, so Reya is going to listen afterwards when this comes out as a podcast but wanted to get that question in about who invented the alphabet.

[John] Well, good morning, Reya. And in terms of who invented the alphabet, it seems to have been people who were working on big giant projects in Egypt. So you see the pyramids and these things you can barely believe that human beings created, there were

worker drones who were stuck doing that work and the Egyptians had already invented hieroglyphics. And hieroglyphics are very beautiful, but it's a very complicated system. It takes years to use. It's kind of like Chinese, which you might, depending on your ethnicity, know a little of. It takes a lifetime. Not that many people ever actually use hieroglyphics. These workers wanted to write stuff on the wall and they're certainly not going to use this complicated system because they had other things to do. So somebody, whose name we will never know, came up with the idea of using a little picture to mean what we think of as a letter; to use a little picture to mean not snake but say, for example, in their mind, it would be to use a little picture of a snake to mean "ssssss". And next thing you knew, you had this thing that we now call an alphabet. And first, a group of people called the Phoenicians who sailed around a lot from the Middle East, used a version of this. Then the Greeks got it. They really took it and ran with it and basically sprinkled it all over Europe. And then it also sprinkled in the eastward direction. And so all sorts of writing systems...all sorts of alphabets that you see in Asia, including down in Southeast Asia, down in where you are from, as a matter of fact, that look nothing like what we think of as an alphabet...all really started with what these workers came up with sweating next to the pyramids.

[Jane] Well, while we're talking about this, John, let's go to Rahi, who's calling in from Toronto, Ontario, in Canada. Hi, Rahi, go right ahead.

[Rahi] Hi.

[Jane] What's your question, Rahi?

[Rahi] My question is, "If humans came from Africa, how come the oldest languages are from places like India and China, not Africa?"

[Jane] Interesting question. What do you think about that John, you were just talking about the origin of languages.

[John] Rahi, there's a difference between languages that are written down, which is, for example, Sanskrit and Chinese, and then languages that are just spoken. And the weird thing is that the vast majority of the world's languages are only talked and nobody writes them down. Depending on how you look at it, only about 200, maybe 100 languages are written in any real way beyond some interested person who walks in and tries to scratch them down on paper. So we can be sure that the first language would have been spoken somewhere in Africa, probably as much as three hundred thousand years ago. But nobody would have written it down because writing wasn't invented until about sixty five hundred years ago. So first written languages. Yes. For example, the ones that you mentioned. First spoken languages, eons before that. And that would have been in Africa.

[Jane] Hmmmm. Let's go to Gigi who's calling in from Highbridge, New Jersey. Hi, Gigi.

[Gigi] Hi. I have a question. Why do we speak so many languages?

[Jane] Yeah. So, John, why do we speak so many languages? And Gigi, before we get an answer to your question, let's bring one in from Juliet, who's calling in from Monroeville, Pennsylvania. Hi, Juliet.

[Juliet] Hi.

[Jane] What's your question for John?

[Juliet] My question is, "How many languages are there?"

[Jane] Alright, you got it, John? Why do we speak so many different languages and how many are there?

[John] Here is how we know how to do this. For example, do me a favor and say, "H-O-R-R-I-B-L-E."

[Jane] Me?

[John] Yes, you, yeah.

[Jane] I say "horrible". [pronounced like "hoar"]

[John] OK, I say "horrible" [pronounced like "hard"] and to me, "horrible" sounds like something kind of new. And to you, "horrible" might sound kind of weird. And that is a change that's been happening. If we went back 100 years ago, most people in America would have said "horrible" [John's version] and "horrible" [Jane's version] would have been something only a few people said. Now I'm in the minority. What happens is that...take that difference where two different dialects of English are emerging. Imagine that happening to just every sound. Well, the first language would have been like that. So at first, maybe the word for wind was something like "lago". But then there were some people who would have said "lago". Well, that sort of thing keeps happening and happening and happening. And if you're talking about three hundred thousand years, next thing you know, you've got 7,000 different languages because language is always changing whether we want it to or not.

[Jane] So you said 7,000. Is that about how many languages we think there are right now?

[John] I'm told to say that. I think more realistically, it's 6,000. But some people are lumpers. Some people are splitters. I'm a lumper. But if you want to be a splitter, 7,000, and that sounds better. So let's say.....

[Jane] What's a lumper and a splitter?

[John] There are some people who like to look at things and to have them be in just a few categories to look at how things are alike. And so I look at two ways of speaking and I think, "Well, those are variations on the same thing." Some people are splitters where they like to have things be as different as possible. And so they'll look at two different ways of speaking. And even if the people can understand each other, they'll say, "Well, still, those are two different languages. They have different cultures," etc.. And it can be hard to decide whether you want to be a lumper or a splitter. It's almost a personality type and I'm a lumper. So I say, "6,000." But a splitter will say, "Oh, no, no, it's 7,000!" And so who knows.

[Jane] So could you talk a little bit about the difference between a language and a dialect? I mean, we were talking about the different ways that you and I might say the same word. And I'm married to somebody who came from Wales. And so we say a lot of things differently and our two year old...well, he's not two anymore...but at two, he was saying, "Mom, you say 'fart' and dad says 'faht', you say 'butter' and Dad says 'buttuh'." But we're

both speaking English. We can understand each other, most of the time, but we sound very different. So what's the difference between an accent or a dialect and a language?

[John] Well, you know, it's one of those things where there's no real answer. But nobody wants to hear that and so I'm gonna give you the closest thing to an answer, which is that English and French are distinct languages. Nobody would think of English and French as being different ways of using the same thing. But there are cases in between where, for example, if you're an American English speaker and you're married to a Welsh speaker, then you have different accents and there's some words that are different. And so we say that those are both English, but they are different dialects of English. But the thing is, there are places you can go in, for example, the United Kingdom, you can go to Wales or you can go to parts of England especially, where people are speaking English technically but it would take you weeks to not have trouble understanding what people were saying. And that's because the language change has gone on longer there than it has between, for example, any kind of U.K. English and American English or even here you can go to Gullah country, the Sea Islands, which are near South Carolina and Georgia. And you can hear people speaking the kind of English that sounds kind of like something Caribbean. But if they speak it fast, you might as well be listening to French. So there's no line that you can draw. Languages differ from each other. Dialects differ from each other less than languages do. And you have all sorts of intermediate cases in between.

[Jane] Yeah, some of you who are native Spanish speakers might be thinking, "Yeah, that's certainly true in Spanish, too." and probably in every language. I mean, I thought I could speak Spanish really well when I was in college and I had lived in Chile. And then I took a class on Puerto Rican Spanish and it was like, what is this language?! I can't understand anything.

[John] Exactly.

[Jane] Let's go to Oscar, who's calling in from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Hi again, Oscar. Nice to talk with you.

[Oscar] Hi.

[Jane] Hi. What's your question?

[Oscar] What was the most recent language invented?

[Jane] So, John, you know, you were talking about how languages and dialects change in some of the older languages. Oscar's question is, what's the most recent language?

[John] That's a very interesting question. And, you know, the answer to it is that the most recent languages that are being invented are usually sign languages used by people who don't hear, but they use their hands to talk. And there are sign languages emerging, often in Asia, for example. Right now there's one in Nicaragua, in Central America, that only really took shape when deaf children were put together into a school in the '80s. So those tend to be the newest languages. In terms of languages that are taught, the kind of language that we're using right here, a lot of new ones arose when there were plantations, which was an unfortunate thing, but plantations where certain large countries brought lots of people from different parts of the world, speaking all kinds of languages together, and they created new ones. And so in Hawaii, there's something people called "Pidgin". Pidgin means something that isn't really a language but Hawaiian Pidgin is a language and it's a

way of speaking English that once again, it's so hard for us to understand that you could often think of it as a different language. And that language didn't exist until the 1890s. So plantation slavery, plantation agriculture created a lot of new languages in the middle centuries of the last millennium. But in terms of languages that are happening right now within your kids' lifetimes, that usually is languages spoken by, used by deaf people.

[Jane] And there are changes in words, though, right? I mean, young people today may be changing, either inventing new words or changing the meaning of older words. And that can happen much more quickly within a language.

[John] Oh, constantly. Yeah, it's at the point where kids, you guys' age, when you get a little older and you start watching or being made to watch what I think of as an old movie, a movie made in like the '30s or the '40s, you're going to sometimes have trouble understanding what people are talking about. Or more to the point, we'll see a Shakespeare play now and we know all of the words, but if you see "King Lear" or "Romeo and Juliet" in the original...that Shakespeare wrote it as...it can be hard to understand what's going on because the meanings of a lot of the words have changed in all kinds of ways. So that's always going on. Not many people would say that we are using a different language than Shakespeare, but the language has changed an awful lot.

[Jane] All right. So we're talking about languages and we're going to talk more about words and word meanings and word power in just a minute. But while we're on languages, let's go to Max in Sharon, Massachusetts. [00:16:55] Hi, Max.

[Max] Hi.

[Jane] You have a question for John?

[Max] Yes.

[Jane] Go for it. What is it?

[Max] What is the first language?

[Jane] Alright, so we've gotten the most recent one and you were talking a little bit about the first written languages. But do we know what the very first language was, John McWhorter?

[John] You know, no, but I know what a person is asking. The first language that we can have in writing, when you dig up something that somebody is trying to say in writing and it's sixty five hundred years ago, that is a language called "Sumerian" that no longer exists. And we're not even sure what languages it was related to. So the first language that you can see on the page is this Sumerian, which has been gradually figured out. But in terms of what the first language would have been, there are (and there's some language specialists who would bop me on the head for saying this, but I think I think they're being a little too picky) there are languages spoken in the southern part of Africa today that have lots of clicks in them. And the clicks aren't just ways of going [makes clicking noise with tongue] or something like that. The clicks are as much a part of the language as for us sounds like "bu" and "ah" and "cu" are. Those people are possibly descendants of the world's very first people.

They possibly are genetically closest to the first people and their languages may be something like what a language was originally like. Now, of course, even their languages have been changing for probably hundreds of thousands of years. So it's not as if they're still speaking *the* first language. But there's evidence that the first language may have been one that had those clicks in it or it may not have. The first language you can see on the page, though, is a mysterious Middle Eastern language called Sumerian.

[Jane] All right, so I think I have a quick one for you here before we go to a break. Here's a question that came in from Jasmine.

[Jasmine] I'm seven years old, I live in Williston, Vermont and my question is, "What is the most spoken language?" Thank you.

[Jane] What do you think, John? The most spoken language in the world.

[John] The big one is probably Mandarin Chinese. It seems like everybody in the world speaks Mandarin, except maybe the three of us. And so it just has a huge population of native speakers and then non-native speakers. English gives it a run for its money, depending on what you mean by speaking English, because it may be that you only use English as your third or your fourth language. But in terms of the language that is spoken by the very most people, that Mandarin Chinese has really done its job in that way.

[Jane] Wow, that's very cool. Alright, we're talking words and language today with linguist John McWhorter, and listeners, we want to know what questions you have about how we talk, why we use the words we do. We'll be right back.

[Jane] I'm Jane Lindholm, and this is But Why: A Broadcast for Curious Kids. Today, we're talking about words and language with linguist John McWhorter. He teaches at Columbia University and he hosts a podcast about words and language called Lexicon Valley. If you have a question about language, give us a call or you can send an e-mail to questions@butwhykids.org. John, can you actually explain what a linguist is? I've said that you are one a couple of times now, but that's not a word that everybody's familiar with.

[John] Well, Jane, I'm not sure we always know what we are because we always say that we're scientists of language. But that doesn't really seem to mean anything. Basically what it is, is that language seems like it's kind of random. It seems like it's just a whole bunch of words that you memorize and you use. But it's more complicated than that. You have to know how to put the words together. And what a lot of linguists are doing is trying to figure out how is it that we put the words together and that everybody learns how to do it? There seem to be rules and then there aren't rules. How do you handle this thing that's called a language? Then some people like to study how language changes over time because it never does stop changing any more than clouds stop changing in the sky. Some people want to know how kids learn language. What is the process that allows you to learn language? Other people want to study how language is arranged in the brain. That's a really growing field at this point because we're beginning to understand at least a little bit about the brain. But, basically, what we're doing is we're trying to figure out how language works because it's not just memorizing a whole bunch of words. That's what we do.

[Jane] That's so cool because, you know, yeah, sometimes I think we just think of ourselves as talking. And when I'm speaking, I know my brain is working, but my mouth and my brain are working so fast, I'm not thinking too hard about how to form the word. But there is so much that's interesting about the science of how we speak. But then, John, you

also look at why we say the things we do, how we say different things that can mean one thing in one context and another thing if you're trying to say something different. You know, there's so much culture in language, too.

[John] That's another way of being a linguist, too; language and culture, language and your place in society, language and what, as I said before, what you don't say. So if you say, "We're totally going to go there tomorrow", you don't mean "We're going to go there in a total way". You mean "We know that we're going to go there, even though some people say we're not." If you say, "We're totally going to go there", you kind of mean, "Even though mom says we're not going to"... or something like that. Nobody *tells* you that. But an awful lot about language is all those little assumptions between you and the other people that aren't being said. And that's another thing that linguists study.

[Jane] Yeah. Or in your sentence alone, I can imagine bringing in some sarcasm where you're sort of meaning the opposite and saying, "Oh, yeah, we're *totally* going to go to the ice cream store" when what I'm really saying is "We're not going."

[John] Right. You're not going to go. And to know a language is to understand those things. A lot of you listening probably never thought about that until now. A linguist might write a paper about that. So that's what we do.

[Jane] So Kessler, who's four and lives in Plymouth...although I'm not sure which Plymouth because there are a million Plymouths...but Kessler says, "Why do some words mean two things?" and not the sarcastic way, but Kessler says, for example, "can". "Can" means "I can do it" or it could just be a cup, a container, a can.

[John] Mm hmm. That happens. The reason that you have these things that sound alike is accident, usually. And so you've really only got so many sounds and sounds are always changing. But eventually they're going to be cases where you get a word where the sounds have changed and led to the exact same word, meaning very different things. And so, for example, "can" as in "I can do it", that goes back to the word that we're more familiar with as "to know". And so think about how "knowing" is spelled "K-no" [pronounces K separately], like that. There was a kind of a "come-now-on" verb in earlier English and that became "to k-know", to know something, that became "I can do something". In the past, that became "I could do it" and so on. So that's what that is. Now "can", off the top of my head...you know, linguists actually, contrary to popular belief, we don't all have 50,000 word histories in our head...I'm not sure where "can", as in that thing that, you know, tuna comes in, comes from. But it certainly was not from this "to know" verb. But it just happened that with whatever that original word was, the sounds changed and came down to "can". And here we are today. You know something? I am going to do something that I would not usually do. I'm going to go online right now, because I know where to look, and we can find out actually the answer to that question. And so where in the world did the word "can" come from? Now, it might be you're watching in real time. It's one of those words that often there is no etymology. But now I'm looking it up. OK.

[Jane] When you say "etymology", John, you mean the history of the word.

[John] Exactly. Yeah. Thank you. I forgot my audience.

[Jane] But I love that word "etymology", I use it all the time. And I love knowing not only where words come from, but where the word "etymology" might come from. But yeah,

learning the history of a word can tell you about its meaning, it can tell you why it's spelled the way it's spelled and how we use it. It's a really cool thing to be able to study.

[John] It is always so much fun. And apparently the word “can” as in, you know, something with a tin can, it goes back to a Latin word that meant like a reed or a long piece of grass and gradually it came to mean this thing that goes “GLUNK” and the sound started. It started as “comma” and then it became “can” as we say now. And it's just a coincidence that that sounds just like saying “I can swim.”

[Jane] Well, I mean, that's one of the neat things, isn't it, that in any language and in English in particular, the one that we're speaking now, there are words that came in from so many different places that even though they sound or are even spelled the same, they might have really different word histories.

[John] Vastly different. And so you have that all the time, especially in a language with a very mixed set of words like English. We get our words from all over the place. So, yeah, you have a lot of pairs like that.

[Jane] Let's go to Harmony, who's calling in from Wilmington, North Carolina. Hi, Harmony. What's your question for John?

[Harmony] My question is, “Why does every sentence start with a capital letter?”

[Jane] Oh, I like that question. That's, you know, now we're talking about grammar and how we form and write and say sentences and paragraphs and all of that. But, John, why are all sentences started with a capital letter?

[John] You know, there's a whole story to tell about little aspects of how we write the thing called “language” and why. The capital letters mostly start as what the Greeks originally gave us. The lowercase letters are invented afterwards as a sort of offshoot system from that. And at first, capital letters were something...if you were writing in that offshoot system, you mostly use what we think of as lowercase letters...and you use the capital letters as a kind of a decoration at, for example, the very beginning of something you wrote. So you'd write, “Once upon a time” and you'd start it out with a big “O” because that looked nice. Gradually, some people decided, wouldn't it also look nice to start every sentence with a capital. And we don't know exactly who was responsible for that. But it started out as something that people thought looked kind of nice. And you can imagine doing it even yourself. And so you don't want to use a capital letter just once on every page because you enjoy drawing it. And so, you decide, “Well, let's have that be at the beginning of every section”, then maybe it's “Well, let's have that be at the beginning of every sentence.” And there was no reason for it. But, you know, you'll find as you get older that there's no reason for over half of the things that you do. And so that is what happened with capital letters and sentences beginning with them.

[Jane] You know, it's also kind of cool because when you think about a sentence as one complete thought, that capital letter, if you're reading it, it just gives you that visual cue like, “Oh, right.” So even if I missed the period at the end, this is a new thought or this is an important word.

[John] Yeah, we wouldn't want it to be any other way, but that would perplex, of course, many people who use other writing systems. Yeah, I love capital letters.

[Jane] Here's Isadora, who's calling in from Toronto, Ontario. Hi, Isadora.

[Isadora] Hi.

[Jane] What's your question?

[Isadora] My name is Isadora, I'm eight years old and I'm from Toronto. My question is, "How many words are there and what language has the most words?"

[Jane] Oh, John, do you know the answer? How many words are there and which language has the most?

[John] You know, there's no real way to tell. But what I can tell you is this. And so, for example, let's talk about makeup. You've got some makeup on your face. You probably don't yet but one day you might. And so "makeup", is that one word or two? And then think about how you're going to make up with your friend. Is that one word or two? And is it a different word from the makeup on your face? "I think I might be making up a story one day." Is that one word or two? And is it the same as making up your face? Sort of. Is it the same as making up with your friend? What are the words? How many words are involved? It's very hard to count. Then the next thing is that if you take a language that nobody has ever written down and you work with it and you work with it, you work with it, they're probably a good forty thousand, fifty thousand words. Whereas a dictionary of English is something where if you dropped it on your foot, you'd have to go to the hospital and it can have a million words in it. And so you think, well, "English has a large vocabulary" [sounding grandiose] but if you actually look in that dictionary, a great many of the words in there are words that nobody has used in hundreds of years.

And you kind of wonder, is this a word or is it just that because we write down our language, we can keep the ones that aren't real. And so, for example, you will hear somebody say something like, "He is a ruthless enemy" and it means that this is an enemy who has no mercy. He's a mean person. He's ruthless. If you look at a really large dictionary, there's this word "ruth" that means mercy. Is that a word? No, it's just something that got stuck in the dictionary. It was a word five hundred years ago. We can look it up because we can write it down. They're words like that in unwritten languages, but everybody's forgotten them. And so they're not considered words. So it's really hard to say what language has the most vocabulary. A written language seems like it has a bigger one because you have these books full of words that nobody really uses. But in terms of language used by people walking around in their lives using words actively...several tens of thousands of words. Now, some languages can pretend that they have more words because you can have a big book that preserves every word that anybody's ever come up with. But that's kind of a stunt more than really telling you how many words the language has.

[Jane] Well, why don't we just take those out of the dictionary then?

[John] I don't know. I think, in a way, it's silly. We should say this is a historical book. But then the problem is that you can't always know where to draw the line. There's some words that people may have used a hundred years ago, and some people might now say that they're still words, even though they are or, for example, a word like "perky". You know, "This is a perky person." Would you ever actually say that except in quotation marks? "One thing I like about him is he's *perky*." No, it's kind of a joke word. I wonder if anybody will be using it in 50 years. But you can be sure people will keep it in the

dictionary, especially because you'll always be able to see it in older writing. So this stuff just gets very subtle.

[Jane] Well, Rishi, who's twelve and lives in the United Kingdom, wants to know where new words originate from.

[John] Well, you know, one place that new words originate from is when you smash two words together. And so a "blackbird" is a particular kind of bird, not just a black bird. And that, of course, came from black and bird coming together. "Daisy" comes from "day's eye". And so you can see that sort of thing happening again and again as life goes on. And so "brunch", we think of that is so ordinary. Even when I was little, which wasn't [ahem] that long ago, "brunch" was a funny word. It was kind of like, oh, ha ha, breakfast and lunch together = brunch. Now we just think of brunch as a thing and many of us like me don't eat breakfast at all. So that's one place where new words come from...

[Jane] ...John, you're supposed to eat breakfast!

[John] You know, people say that but, after a while, your waistline starts telling you otherwise so you avoid it. "All children, here, everybody start your day with a good breakfast!" and only change that when you're past 45. But also there are words like, for example, "diss". "He dissed me." That was funny twenty five years ago. That was not considered a real word. Now it's made its way into dictionaries. That starts as disrespect and then it comes to be used in a brand new way. And next thing you know, you have a new word. It's fun watching the new words come in.

[Jane] So some of the words that people listening right now...our young kids...might start using, could be words that, by the time they're adults are, you know, sort of regular old words but that you and I, John, never used when we were kids and when we're in our 70s and 80s might be saying, "What is this word these young folks are using?"

[John] That is inevitably going to happen. Yeah, I like to listen to those words and think "Hmm, that's the language of the future," even if I would seem hokey using it myself. Yeah, there's always that turnover in how new words come in.

[Jane] This is But Why: A Broadcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. Today, we're talking about words and language and meaning with John McWhorter. He has spent his career studying how words and languages change over time, how their meanings change, and why they're so powerful. And you are asking some great questions about these things. You'll have a few more minutes to call in with your question. John, here's a question we got from Charlotte.

[Charlotte] I'm five and I'm from Minneapolis, Minnesota. And I'm wondering, why do people say "mama" for their mom and [not call them] by name.

[Jane] Now, John, some people do call their mom by their first name or a nickname, but a lot of people say "mom" or "mama" or "mum" or some variation of that. And so why?

[John] Well, you know, it's a really cute answer. If you are a baby and you're just laying there, you know, in the little seat and you can't talk yet and you've got a mouth. You swallow some milk. What's the first sound that's really going to come out? You're sitting there, [imitates baby] "ha-ha-ma-ma". That's the first thing you're going to do. Now, the next thing you might do is something like "mama". And that is why in a whole lot of

languages in the world, the word for mother is “mama” and the word for father is “dada” because of just what your mouth is likely to do. Because the first time a child goes “mama”, the person who is looking at the child... and generally, in most societies and especially until about five minutes ago, that was more likely to be the female parent than the male parent...then she is going to think, “Oh, yeah, I am your mama. That's right, I'm mama.” The next thing you know, you've got a new word. And so that's where “mama” comes from. And that's why, if you look at languages all over the world...and it's not that in every language “mama” is mom and “dada” is father...but it's so many languages where “mama” is mama and then “dada”, it's either “tata” or “dada” or sometimes “baba” or something like that, but you can tell that it's because the first thing that comes out is “mama”. Then after you've made that connection, the next thing is who's the parent that's kind of standing about a yard away, the other one?’ And that's “dada”. There you go.

[Jane] You do that baby sound very well, by the way, John.

[John] I had some.

[Jane] What about grandparents? Are the names for grandparents more different than the names for a mom and a dad?

[John] Whoa! You know, I actually I know the answer to that because somebody asked me that once. No, there's no pattern with that. The grandparents don't come in and you might think they would, given that in many societies the grandparents are as much there as the mother and the father. But no, those words don't pattern in any cute way, although, of course, they often are something repeated. So it's “boom boom, boom boom”. And that's just something that babies do. And that's why so many words...I think Chinese speakers will particularly understand that...so many family words are “boom boom”, the same thing over and over. “Ya Ya” or “Gi Gi” or “May May” or something like that. Babies do that so these things set in early.

[Jane] Let's go back to our callers. Colin is on the line with us from Manchester, Vermont. Hi, Colin. Do you have a question for John?

[Colin] Yes, I do.

[Jane] Go right ahead.

[Colin] My question is, “What is the least used language?”

[Jane] John, what's the least used language?

[John] The least used. I'm not sure what that means. I think what I would have to say is that of the 7,000 languages, many of them are on the verge of no longer being alive because the only people who speak them are grandparents who will only be with us for so much longer and they were not able to pass the language onto their kids. And so now it's at the point where the only people who speak the language are 80, but nobody 50 speaks it and certainly nobody your age. And so that language, unless it's been written down and somebody works really hard to make people speak it again...and frankly, even that usually doesn't work...that language is not going to be alive. So there are many languages, for example, in the United States, Native American languages, where they're not used very much anymore because there just aren't that many people left who speak it as part of their daily life. That's unfortunately very common around the world.

[Jane] And let's hear it from Edie, who's calling in from Burlington, Vermont. Edie, go right ahead with your question for John McWhorter.

[Edie] My question is, "What is the easiest language to speak?"

[Jane] Did you get that, John, what's the easiest one to speak?

[John] I did. Yeah, that gets dicey, but the easiest language to speak.... Now, nobody has trouble speaking their native language, which is a wonder to me, because some languages are much harder than others. There are some languages with so many rules and so many exceptions that I can't believe people actually speak them, but they do. There are some languages that are much easier than that. And, you know, in terms of the ones that anybody has heard of, one of them is Indonesian. If you had to learn a language quickly and be able to have half of a conversation, Indonesia would be a very nice language to have to learn because it has a lot less of the things that make languages really hard. So I'm going to say Indonesian. There are some other languages that we could also cite. But the easy and uncontroversial one is Indonesian.

[Jane] John, I want to ask you about an article that you recently wrote, for adults, in the "Atlantic" and you were talking about how kids who speak a different language at home that's different from the dominant language in their area or maybe different from the language that they speak at school, they're actually maybe getting better at their home language, (the language their parents speak to them) right now than they would be, because so many kids are out of school right now. How do you figure that out and why is that interesting to you?

[John] It's interesting to me because people are often asking, these days, what effect might the virus have on language? And the first answer is, well, we're using all these new terms like social distancing. But honestly, I don't find that very interesting. And it's also kind of depressing. So is there any other answer? And from things people were telling me... and I also kind of would have guessed it, but then people started telling me...I realize that if children have to stay home and they're not in school, if there's a home language, then they're much less likely to be letting it behind and they have much more of an opportunity to get good at it because they're going to spend so much time with possibly their grandparents or their parents. And I heard from a lot of people that kids are getting better at those home languages because English in the United States is everywhere. It surrounds you. It's on the signs. It's on TV. It's easy. Even if your parents speak and live in another language, as you get older, you really speak English. And the other language, you kind of only halfway speak it. For a lot of kids right now, that's changing because you actually get to speak that home language more because you can't go anywhere. So it's one of the few good things about what has happened since March.

[Jane] You know, what I found really interesting in that is, as you said, John, it's not just that kids will be able to sort of understand the language as they hear it or speak it, to, you know, get their points across, but at least from what I've learned in learning a second language, it takes a really long time before you can make a joke in a second language or have that kind of easy way with the language that you do with something that you speak more fluently. And what you're finding is that kids who are speaking in their home language are maybe going to get that level of fluency that they otherwise might not have had at all.

[John] It's so important. So much of learning a language is about situations rather than grammar. And so, for instance...this is very random "Keep your eye on the road!" somebody says in the car. Whatever language you and I have learned in school, they did not teach us how to say, "Keep your eye on the road." And you know it's not going to be, "Retain your eyesight." You know, every language has a different way of saying "Keep your eye on the road." The only way you're going to learn that is to be in a car with somebody where you hear them saying it in the language. And it's something like this that allows you to really see the language in use. And yeah, yeah, in its way it's a wonderful thing.

[Jane] So that's one of the good parts about everybody maybe staying home right now. But there are some downsides when it comes to language and keeping up with our ability to learn and speak and read and write. Are you finding that some of that may be slipping now because kids are home for so long?

[John] Honestly, with my kids, no, because they come from, you know, a book lined home, you know, with a very nerdy father and, you know, both of their parents have PhDs, etc.. If they get to go back to school in the fall, I think they'll be fine. [00:42:49] And with my younger daughter, who's five, I've taken the opportunity here to teach her to read, you know, by myself with a book, because I figure, you know, why should I let her slip? But for people who live in different circumstances where school really is where they get access to language as you use it beyond the way that you use it just in an everyday way, school is where they learn how to read. School is where they learn how to write. School is where they learn how to use sort of the outer layers of language. I think that this is going to be really tough for them, especially if schools don't open again in the fall, because how do you learn? Your language is partly, you know, yelling things like "Keep your eye on the road", but the language is also the sorts of things that you see in books and if you're from a home where books aren't that important, you get your books at school. So I am worried about that with a lot of kids in our country.

[Jane] Do you think we speak differently or use language differently on the Internet than we do in person, too? Because a lot of kids and a lot of adults are having meetings and classes on video chat or they're doing their work on the Internet.

[John] You know, I want to give a fun answer on that but I'm not sure that there's a difference. I think we use language on Zoom the way we use it all the time and find that it doesn't quite work. And the reason it doesn't quite work is because of the things that you've mentioned. And I'm glad you have several times, which is that language is so much about context and a lot of that. It's about reading facial expressions, reading the things that you do with your body, kind of just smelling the air. And you can't do that on Zoom. And that's why you can leave a Zoom conversation feeling like you just took some cinder blocks down into the basement because you're using language the way we always use it and it wasn't designed to be used in this highly filtered way. So we live in funny times.

[Jane] Could we talk a little bit about the power of words and the power of words to hurt people or to make people feel separate or different? Who gets to decide what the power of a word is and whether that's changing or not?

[John] Well, that's a good question. My next book is about profanity, as a matter of fact.

[Jane] The bad words.

[John] Yeah, the bad words. And one of the things that you can do...some people will use a slur against you...and one thing that people do is that they take the slur and they make it into a way of saying "friend", and so you can have a bad word for a black person and then that word becomes used to mean "buddy" among many black people and there are other bad words that have been used that way. But that doesn't completely solve the problem.

[Jane] Or let me give an example, John, of a word that we can say on the radio like nerd. You could say somebody is a nerd. And that's a really bad thing. But you could also say I'm a nerd and I'm proud of it. And you sort of take that word and make it have a meaning that you feel proud about or you take the power away from the bad word.

[John] That is a really handy example because, you know, I'm 54. When I was a kid, that word "nerd" was newish, but it was mean. If somebody called you a nerd when I was 14, you were a nerd and it hurt. And there was a movie called "Revenge of the Nerds" and the nerds were these extremely uncool people. And if you were a nerd, you identified with those people. But, you know, they're wearing bad glasses and they can't control their saliva and they have trouble dating. That's really changed because now there's kind of nerd as something kind of chic and cool. And you can say, "Yes, I'm a nerd and I like books too much and I don't like football and I like that about myself." And in a way, that makes it much easier to be a nerd now than it was 30 or 40 years ago. You can do that with a lot of words. It's one thing that you can do to keep words from having the power that somebody might want them to have. But, you know, life is tough. And so these things are going to keep popping up like weeds. But that's one thing that you can do.

[Jane] But who has the power over words? Because, you know, I might say, "I don't like you using that word" and you might still use it or I don't want that word to mean what it does, but I might not feel like I have the power to change it. Who does get the power?

[John] Yeah, I think that there are many ways of being powerful in our society. And so sometimes it's men having power over women. Sometimes it's white people having power over people of color. I think that part of humanity, unfortunately, is that, you know, some people are mean. And one way that you can be mean is to use language in a way that makes people feel bad. And so you have to be on your guard. But I think that these days, it's partly because of the Internet, it's easier in a way to renegotiate language because we use it so much, basically up in front of the whole country all day long, every day. And groups can come together that couldn't have come together as easily before. So a lot of it is more dynamic than it used to be. But language will come and bite you on the "you know what" from any number of directions. And that's just part of how language is. Language is a wonderful thing. But language can also be a scary thing, too.

[Jane] I'm going to squeeze in two more questions, John, and then you've got like 20 seconds to answer. So here's a question that both PJ and Charlotte had.

[PJ] Hi, my name is PJ. I'm seven years old. I live in Columbus, Ohio. And my question is, "Why do people speak different languages in different parts of the world?"

[Charlotte] Hi, my name is Charlotte and I'm seven years old and I'm from Cambridge, Vermont and my question is "Why are there so many different languages?"

[Jane] And then here's another Charlotte with a different question.

[Charlotte] I'm nine years old and I live in Alberta, Canada. My question is, "Why can't we just speak one language?"

[Jane] Twenty seconds, John. You know, we're all living in a time where we can all watch TV and stuff. Why so many languages? Why don't we all speak one?

[John] Well, at first there was one language in Africa. Then people spread all over the world. And that spread took at least two hundred and fifty thousand years, depending on how you count it. And so, so much has happened. And during that time, because all these people are so separate, all their sounds, all their words started meaning different things. So next thing you knew, you had 7,000. There couldn't be just one language now because they've been to many groups of people completely separate for too long. So it's inevitable. The only way we can have one language is if all people were only about 75 or 100 people, all living in some village. And even then, the language they spoke now wouldn't be the language they spoke before because language is always changing.

[Jane] I love it. John McWhorter, professor of linguistics at Columbia University, a contributor to the "Atlantic", host of Lexicon Valley. Thank you so much, John.

[John] Of course. My pleasure.

[Jane] And thanks to all of you for listening to But Why Live. Join us next week for a kid's press conference.